AN INVESTIGATION OF THE INFLUENCES ON MY ART CAUSED BY LIVING IN SAUDI ARABIA

PROBLEM IN LIEU OF THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
North Texas State University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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Denton, Texas

May, 1979

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FOREWORD

"If man is to survive, he will learn to take a delight in the essential differences between men and between cultures. He will learn that differences in ideas and attitudes are a delight, part of life's exciting variety, not something to fear."[1]

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[1]On the wall of the Corps of Engineer's Office of Council, Riyadh District, Saudi Arabia. The author was not identified.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Islamic Images Interpreted

Personal experiences have always determined certain directions and elements in my work. These experiences include encounters with life's events in general as well as something by which I am stimulated, inspired, or influenced. They are either internal or external, obvious or subtle, direct or indirect; but they do establish themselves in one way or another in much that I produce.

Such experiences and influences are by no means unique to me. On the contrary, they exist as the primary source of nearly all art. Often they are unconscious influences:

> Images stored in the mind rarely present themselves directly, but as webbings, weavings, recollections in which the strands are intricately intertwined. Past and present are somehow sewn together in a continuous fabric.[1]

Occasionally certain experiences are so influential that they can easily be identified. In other cases the influence can only be identified by analysis of the results.

This project was an investigation into the specific influences upon my art produced by my living in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, for two years from August, 1976 through August, 1978. Initially, I had to make a major psychological and

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[1]Noel Frackman, "Arts Reviews," Arts Magazine, 51 (September, 1976), 16.

environmental adjustment. This period of adjustment, referred to as culture shock, was a time of personal confusion about the differences between the American and the Arabian cultures. I characterized my state of mind during this period as a psychological numbness and confusion. This adjustment period altered my interests so that the drawings I had done before I left the United States no longer held their original significance and new interests began to appear. I hope to identify some of the changes that occurred by examining and comparing my earlier drawings with those completed since my return.

Over the two year period in Riyadh, which included trips within Saudi Arabia as well as trips to other countries, I kept a journal of specific influences and changes as they happened. The questions under investigation were: (1) What indigenous imagery have I used and what was its origin? (2) Do I use objects as my initial source as I did prior to going to Riyadh? (3) Has my use of color changed, and if so, why? (4) Have I acquired any elements in my work which could be considered Eastern?

The most direct way to complete this investigation was to compare drawings made before going to Riyadh with those done after my return using my journal and letters to identify important events and thoughts as well as referring to drawings I did while overseas. This comparison was made with specific reference to each of the questions listed above. In

this way I determined specific evidence in my drawings of the direct and indirect influences caused by living in a mid-eastern country. Perhaps this investigation will prompt other artists to examine the significance which their environment has upon them.

CHAPTER II

THE ENVIRONMENT

Briefly, I will list things which characterized my life in Riyadh in contrast to life in the United States. This list is intended to summarize the general social environment in which I lived. While in Riyadh I did not always have access to recent newspapers or magazines. I was not permitted to drive a car or to go out into the city often; I was rarely able to go for a walk outside my compound. Whenever I did go out, I was expected to dress modestly, preferably covered from neck to ankles. In spite of these restrictions, I was able to generate a greater number of close friendships because the American community had created its own nucleus of activities. I was able to travel extensively and to meet people of different European nationalities who also lived in Riyadh. I made friends with Arabs and enjoyed their hospitality and generosity.

This is a necessarily abbreviated synopsis of those aspects of the environment which influenced my work and certainly changed my life. It is very doubtful I would have become interested in Islamic images if I had not gone to Saudi Arabia. While in Saudi Arabia I discovered that to gain an understanding of the Saudi people--who are difficult

people to meet and understand--it was necessary to actively educate myself. For Americans it was easy to laugh at the unsophisticated, naive elements in the Saudi culture, but I believe such an approach did the Saudi people a real injustice.

It is very difficult for a westerner to understand all aspects of the Saudi culture. As Peter A. Iseman says,

> Arabia, for most people, remains a dim, improbable place, as remote as the last continent of Atlantis. The Arabians . . . remain an enigma. . . . Americans who visit Arabia are almost always struck by how different it is from what they have read and imagined. . . . History adds some perspective, but the problems are much the same. "No historical picture is more difficult to compose than the Arabian," historian D. G. Hogarth observed, "the unknown being out of all proportion to the known."[1]

Perhaps part of the basic differences between the West and Arabia can be found in the idea, as Iseman suggests, that the Arab mind has been shaped by the isolation and the disproportion between the smallness of man and the expansiveness of space (the desert)--man and God. In Arabia everything was closely linked with God. Thus, all aspects of the Arab culture were touched by the Moslem religion, including the art.

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[1]Peter A. Iseman, "The Arabian Ethos," Harper's, 256 (February, 1978), 42.

CHAPTER III

ISLAMIC ART FORMS

My recent drawings include a personal interpretation and exploitation of two Islamic art forms--that of the geometric pattern and that of Arabic calligraphy. For this reason, a discussion about Islamic art is appropriate.

Islamic art derived its forms from already existing sources and adapted them in ways which enhanced the religion of Islam. The art was an accumulation, distribution, and sharing of forms from all over the conquered world from Spain to India. Many of the art forms which remained after the advent of Islam were those which had previously existed and could be translated into meanings associated with the beliefs of Islam. Only a minimum number of new forms were ever developed by Islamic artists. Grabar sights three elements which explain the existence of Islamic art. These are (1) the advent of the Moslem religion which altered the mind of those who adopted the faith and (2) led the newly converted Moslem artists to change the meanings given to their artistic creations and also (3) make them select certain forms over others.[1]

Islamic art is generally confined to a particular region of the world extending east-west from India to Spain. It is

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[1]Oleg Grabar, The Formation of Islamic Art (New Haven, 1973), pp. 5-6.

also confined to a certain segment of historical time, roughly the seventh century (Umayyads, Damascus, 661-750) through the eighteenth century (Ottomans, Istanbus, 1290-1922; Safavids, Isfahan, 1506-1722). As the Islamic faith spread across the world, so did the Islamic culture and it compelled the development of certain physical and aesthetic requirements of the art form.

Thus, there were very definite characteristics which distinguished Islamic art despite the fact that it existed in so many different countries and over several centuries. These characteristics were: (1) the forms used were decorative, often purely abstract, and not necessarily functional; (2) the use of decorative Arabic writing was ornamental and usually relied upon verses from the Holy Koran; (3) there was an affinity for detail which filled the entire surface without giving prominence to any part; (4) often the forms had some religious meaning, especially in architecture; and (5) Islamic artists drew from a limited stock of conventions rarely adding any dramatic or emotional content.[2]

The monuments and other art forms of Islam were not unified necessarily by their visual similarities nor by their common function. Rather, the forms in Islamic art were unified by certain common attitudes closely tied to the Moslem religion through the process of artistic creation.

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[2]Ralph Pinder Wilson, Islamic Art (New York, 1957), p. 8.

The artists who practiced the Islamic religion searched for self definition in their artistic work. They sought to find ways they could use their art forms to honor Allah. Mohammed, their prophet, taught humility, so most of the Islamic art forms were not signed or personalized because to have done so would have been an offense to Allah.

Another aspect of Islamic art was brought to my attention by an architect working in Riyadh. He had observed that Arab art was based upon a concept of surrounding space. He referred to the courtyard designs in architecture (mosques and homes) and also to the use of decorative motifs surrounding doorways and windows. I saw that a similar concept was also used in the bordering of manuscript pages. This influenced my approach to composition because I became more conscious of surrounding an interior space in my drawings (slides 14-18, 25).

CHAPTER IV

INDIGENOUS IMAGERY AND ITS DERIVATION

Initially, I was disappointed with the drabness of Riyadh. I felt that behind the monotonous, impersonal walls which kept buildings separate from the public there existed interesting, refined forms. My initial visual impression of Riyadh gradually changed as I became aware that the poetic Arab script of the past and the modern-day use of script in commercial signs and wall graffiti had equal significance for me--primarily pure visual, fluid form. This was also true of the elements of repeated patterns on buildings (arches, repeated decorative motifs along rooflines). Traveling to other mideastern cities increased my fascination with present-day Arab culture as well as the greatness of the Arab past--particularly the centuries during the development of the intricate patterns and the richly decorative written language. In Riyadh these forms were far more austere and simple than those in Damascus, Cairo, Istanbul, or illustrated in books, but nevertheless, the same elements of repeated pattern based upon botanic or geometric form existed. It was these two forms of imagery (Islamic geometric pattern and Arabic calligraphy) to which I eventually narrowed my interest and which constitute the answer to my first question: What indigenous

imagery have I used and from where was it derived? However, before I answer this question more fully, a synopsis of my pre-Riyadh work is necessary.

My approach to imagery has often contained a combination of the use of objects (any visual source as opposed to pure invented form) with an element of manipulation or personal interpretation. This approach combines the visual with the conceptual. In my "Dancing Scissors" series (slides 1-5) 1975 and 1976, I manipulated the scissors form into anthropomorphic images that represented, for me, personalities. In my "Torn Paper" series of 1976 (slides 6-11), I gave my illusionistic torn paper images a quality of being in a state of change, opening from a cocoonal state. One of these, "Folds and Shadows" (slides 10 and 11), was a three-dimensional drawing. The paper was actually torn and folded while the shadows were air-brushed with gray acrylic. This torn paper, three-dimensional drawing suggested to me that subtle variations and overlapping shapes of the shadows cast by the paper created interesting and beautiful images. This realization led to a change in my approach from the direct use of three-dimensional objects (scissors, paper) to the use of pattern and design (shadows) as objects. It was, in a sense, a move from illusionism and the actual third dimension to the second. I intended at that point to explore the possibilities of deriving designs and subject matter from the shadows rather like the gray overlays of paint in "Folds and Shadows" (slide

11). This I would probably have done if I had remained in the United States. However, the continuity of my thoughts was broken and an entirely new set of experiences and influences bombarded me when I went to Riyadh.

In Riyadh I initially suffered from the numbing effect of being totally immersed in an unfamiliar environment, and was unable to do any drawing for a few months. It was necessary to accept certain social restrictions put upon me but I was determined to learn as much as I could about the Arab culture. Later, I began drawing--sketching the sand dunes west of Riyadh, studying their angles and shadows. I sketched the narrow alleyways and mud buildings in Old Riyadh. I sketched camels, the people, the architectural details of the ancient and modern buildings and copied the Arabic writing. I read about Arab history, culture, religion, and about Islamic art. I met Arabs who willingly posed for me. During this time, I experimented with every image I saw that interested me.

I enrolled in an Arabic language course and my interest in written Arabic prompted me to look through books about Islamic art where I saw many examples of the calligraphy and patterns used as borders. I experimented with bordered manuscript compositions in my own drawings (slides 12-16).

One of the first drawings which brought these interests together with past interests was "Arab Alphabet" (January, 1977--slide 12). I had been learning the Arab alphabet in

my language class. It was natural for me to include it in a drawing. I feel this drawing was transitional because it contained elements of my past torn paper images in that the edges and corners of the squares containing the letters have a subtle illusionism as they seem to overlap. "Arab Alphabet" also contains the Islamic geometric pattern in the border. However, after this I paused in the use of the geometric pattern and experimented with the designs from botanical forms because the curvilinear forms repeated the calligraphic fluidity of the Arabic letters.

Since I wanted the botanical forms to repeat, I made cut stencils of the designs so that I could repeat them by tracing around the stencil. This was such an obvious use of a reproductive or printing method that I tried using woodblock prints to repeat the patterns. However, my specific botanical patterns did not lend themselves well to repeated border patterns and the thick oil paint surface was not appealing to me in conjunction with the drawing media, therefore I returned to the use of stencils.

My interest returned to the manuscript page in terms of composition. I wanted to achieve a manuscript quality in my drawing and also express my frustrations about the austerity of Saudi culture and Riyadh's physical characteristics. I further wished to combine all these aspects with what I had hoped to find in the Middle East. In a letter of August, 1977, I wrote: "Anyhow, I am dealing with my--I'll call it

frustration--over not finding the gold and precious stone mosaic-covered mosques, the ornate mihrab, the Grand Islamic Art: that is for me the Lawrence-esque figure of my (imagination) expectation vanishing into a desert mirage or rather a suffocating dust storm only to reveal that in reality there is only dust, heat, filth, goats, camels, and more dust. I am bringing elements of these two opposites: my mirage vs real stuff into the drawings. The mirage is still far stronger in the drawings than the reality--I hate to let go of that dream. I keep thinking that behind these 12-15 foot mud-sand walls there exists the magical wonderland world of Islam."

The "magical wonderland world of Islam" simply did not exist as I had hoped. Therefore, my frustrations and interest in manuscripts led me to work on a series of drawings called "Wahab AlʕTaaya" the implied meaning of which is, "God the bestower of all gifts." My choice of this phrase was conscious because Wahab was also the name of the fundamentalist Islamic religious leader who's teachings were responsible for the extremely austere lifestyle of the Saudis, particularly in the city of Riyadh, where he had the greatest influence. Wahabism forbids everything that is pleasurable or beautiful.[1]

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[1]The strictest Wahabism is summerized in the statement "All knowledge is in the Koran." This is occasionally used in Saudi Arabia as justification for a refusal to do or consider things which are not expressly mentioned in the Koran.

I was dealing with the paradox, as I interpreted it, of Allah the generous and boundless provider contrasted with Wahab the religious zealot who forbade many of the amenities of life thus contributing to Saudi Arabia's very puritanical character. I also used the word "Riyadh" in one of these drawings because it means "the garden," however most of the area occupied by modern Riyadh is barren, desolate desert (slide 19). This series represented my frustration with the outer drabness of the desert city and my search for the concealed refinements of form.

In the spring of 1977, while working on the "Wahab Al¿Taaya" drawings, I took a three-week trip to Cairo, Rome, Athens, and Istanbul. This trip increased my fascination with Islamic repeated pattern because I saw many examples of it in a variety of uses. One of the places I saw the patterns was very significant and I recorded the experience in my journal. On March 19, 1977, I was standing in the inner court of the Ibn Tulun Mosque (876-78 A.D.) looking up at the row of arch-shaped windows lining the uppermost part of the great wall surrounding the mosque. There were one-hundred and nineteen such windows, each with a different repeated pattern covering the window. I later discovered that these were open-lattices.[2] Such patterns were used throughout the Moslem world in window grilles, screen designs, and on "pulpits" in

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[2]David Wade, Pattern in Islamic Art (New York, 1976), p. 13.

mosques. Lattice patterns were used in "Whispering Shadows" (slide 31) and "Sandscript" (slide 35). There are ancient and modern examples of the repeated patterns throughout the Moslem world. The same pattern can be found great distances apart and even in different centuries because of the favorable communications that existed through trade and also because of the general acceptance of the patterns.[3]

The patterns evolved from rather simple forms into highly complex and sophisticated geometric designs. My fascination with the patterns included an admiration for the incredible mathematical and artistic minds which created such complicated and intricate patterns. David Wade explains that the patterns are universally applicable anywhere, anytime, with any subject, in any scale, and in a great variety of materials including metal, textiles, plaster, stone, tile, relief, wood, and in paintings.[4]

Wade further states that the patterns were probably derived from pre-Islamic Byzantine floor mosaics. The Islamic artist developed these patterns into highly intricate, convoluted forms using Pythagoras' geometric formulas.[5]

The widespread use of patterns in the Islamic world indicates that they satisfied some basic visual need in the

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[3]Ibid., p. 7.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid., p. 10.

religion, or somehow reflected the Moslem spirit. Moslem artists were probably searching for new meaning in various simple patterns, thus developing increasingly complex ones. Such a search is related to the Moslem scholar's search for deeper meanings in Koranic verses. This analogy would have justified the use of these patterns to the Moslem mind. Like Pythagoras, the Moslems believed that the structure of the universe was based upon mathematics and that the geometric pattern of lines and circles was the answer to the Platonic search for absolute, ideal beauty.[6] The infinite pattern also seems to have reflected their belief in the omnipotence of Allah. These concepts have made me realize that I have barely touched on the possibilities of the repeated pattern since my primary use of it has been toward visual, symbolic imagery.

In order to work with the geometric patterns which I adopted I simplified each into a single repeated segment of one-eighth of the total pattern. To make this segment, I folded a square piece of paper into fourths and then folded that square diagonally. This triangular section contained the elements that were repeated eight times in the total pattern. I am greatly indebted to David Wade for his mathematical simplification of the patterns.

One pattern which I have used several times because it appeals to me is based upon the sixteen-pointed star with

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[6]Ibid.

eight subordinate star patterns around the periphery (slides 21, 23, 34).[7] In the drawing "A Page From Pastpresent" (slide 34), I applied this pattern and another similar one in rectangular areas allowing the patterns to fuse into one field. I also applied the Arabic writing using a stencil four times: two right side up and two upside down. These letters create a third area of pattern. Once the patterns were applied, I began developing the intricacies of the drawing with value and line. I developed three areas of darkest value as focal points in the field of Islamic repeated pattern, always thinking consciously of the edge, surrounding the central area. I was curious to see how this conscious use of what I understand to be a concept of space inherent in the Arab mind would work in a non-bordered field of pattern. Before the drawing had gone very far, I decided to add stenciling. I first cut the letters across the bottom edge which repeated the writing at the top and also implied that the shapes extended beyond that paper edge. Near the top of the Islamic pattern, I cut stencils of the intertwining lines as they wound through the pattern. I backed the drawing with Rives gray to repeat the grays of the pencil values.

The second Islamic image I experimented with was, as I have mentioned, Arabic writing which I have used consistently since I first began to learn the language. My use of Arabic

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[7]Ibid., p. 65.

writing has gone through changes due to my increasing knowledge of the language. At first, I simply used the alphabet, then I used an Arabic phrase that I found in the Arabic-English Dictionary which had paradoxical connotations for me. This phrase was وهاب العطايا . Now I am using personal Arabic phrases. They are ungrammatical and possibly meaningless to Arabic speaking people, but since they are not necessarily meant to be read or even readable in many of the drawings nor do their meanings pertain directly to that of the drawings, it makes no difference whether they can be understood or not. For me, their main value is as design and pattern having visual meaning similar to the geometric Islamic patterns.

The phrases I have tried to write are very simple, personal expressions of how I feel about my Arab friends and myself. I include them here simply as documentation:

(1) انا و انتي , ana wa inti, me and you.

(2) باحاول اتعلم اللغة العربية , bahawal atalm allugah alarabiyah, I'm trying to learn the Arab language.

(3) عايز اتكلم عربي مع اصحابي العرب , aiyz atakalm arabiy ma asahaabiy alarab, I want to speak Arabic with my Arab friends.

While my "Wahab AlعTaaya" series was in progress, I went to Istanbul, Turkey. I noted in my journal on April 3, 1977, that when I was looking through the cases and displays in the Calligraphy Room of the Topkapi Palace I saw among hundreds of others ". . . a fascinating form of calligraphy [which]

was 'engraved' according to the description beside it but actually appeared to be made by cutting stencil-type Arabic letters through a sheet of very thin vellum and putting a second sheet of different colored vellum behind it."

When I returned home, I began working with stenciled letters in the drawings of the "Wahab AlɛTaaya" series (slides 17 and 18). At the time, I did not realize that by breaking through the paper surface I was essentially doing the same thing I had done in my "Folds and Shadows" a year or so earlier. I have used the technique of cutting through the paper surface whenever I wanted the subtle shapes, lines, and shadows that such a technique gives. As backing, I use different shades of paper such as Rives buff, Rives gray, Rives BFK, or I use pastels or pencil to color the paper beneath, as in "Suleman's Zoujah" (slide 21).[8]

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[8]Zoujah means wife in Arabic, Saudi dialect.

CHAPTER V

OBJECTS AS AN INITIAL SOURCE

I have described my use of objects before I went to Riyadh as having an element of personal manipulation, sometimes anthropomorphic and sometimes in a state of metamorphis. The question here is whether I still use objects in this manner or has my use changed? My definition of visual object is very broad and includes both two and three-dimensional forms. An object is anything that is seen as opposed to things that are thought, felt, heard, tasted, or in any other way recognized as existing. From this definition it is obvious that I still use objects.

In these drawings I no longer alter or twist a three-dimensional object as in "Dancing Scissors." I had begun to get away from that, however, in the "Torn Paper" series when I became interested in the two-dimensional patterns of overlapping shadow forms. Possibly this change was in progress in the shadow drawings before I arrived in Riyadh, in which case it was not an influence caused by the new environment, but simply a turning point in my approach to imagery. Possibly my interest in manuscript page and the flat patterns simply replaced the two-dimensional shadow forms with new two-dimensional imagery.

In any case, my present use of object is as a "field" of pattern or design with subtle, illusionistic passages in the drawings where the pattern seems to undulate, hover in space, coming forward, then receding (slides 22, 23, 30-32). In some places the pattern is lost, then found; sometimes the lines of the pattern are positive, the next instant they are negative; sometimes the pattern is very ambiguous, then very obvious; sometimes it has an ephemeral quality and yet infinite.

Whereas before I derived subject matter from three-dimensional objects (making metallic scissors soft and floppy, or torn paper in a state of transformation) now I work with ambiguous space, with subtle, interlacing lines and shapes. As I work with these elements, I constantly discover new subordinate elements in the patterns and calligraphic line interrelationships.

CHAPTER VI

THE FUNCTION OF COLOR

As a physical environment, the desert of Saudi Arabia is basically monochromatic. All things are covered with a layer of warm, ochre-colored sand and in the bright sun the colors that do exist are washed out. As a reaction against this lack of local color, the Arab women wear very bright colors beneath the concealing black veils.[1] Slide 28 shows pot-holders, hand-made by Bedouin women from scraps of their clothing. One color combination includes purple, yellow, and green all in the same fabric. The Arabs also fill their homes with colorful carpets and wall hangings as well as a colorful combination of modern items from the west. I have responded to the colors of Saudi Arabia--both the physical sand-color and the brilliant colors the Arabs use.

In my drawings and prints of 1975-1976, I used a very limited range of colors: blue and brown with black, gray, and white. My "Dancing Scissors" drawings began in black and white (slides 1 and 2) and moved into grays and blues (slides 3 and 4). The "Torn Paper" drawings were executed in brown and blue. "How Revealing" (slide 8) shows the

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[1]The Arab words for veil are burga and abaiyah in the Saudi dialect. I have used burga in the title of one of my drawings (slide 25).

greatest use of color in this series, but is still very subdued. As I became increasingly more interested in shadows cast on white paper, I limited my color to gray as in the three-dimensional drawing, "Folds and Shadows" (slides 10 and 11).

Through the work done in Riyadh, color returned with subtlety in "Arab Alphabet" (slide 12). I executed this work with applied acrylic washes on top of pencil. The colors in the "Wahab AlʕTaaya" series returned to a reliance on blues and browns with an occasional use of orange and gold (slide 13).

In contrast, some of my recent works contain more color. In fact, in my drawings dealing with the Bedouin woman (slides 21-27), I began the drawings with the intention of conveying something about the Bedouin woman through the use of bright colors. The combination of black with bright colors represented the veiled woman. I have yet been unable to articulate all my impressions of the Bedouin woman; her life, isolation, and over protected environment.

In the drawings which dealt with the desert or manuscript concepts, my color was less vibrant and more value based on pencil (slides 29-39). In these, color was not necessarily essential to convey any aspect of the drawing as it was in the Bedouin woman drawings.

CHAPTER VII

MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES

Which new materials and techniques have I adopted? When I first posed this question, I had only a very vague idea of what kind of environment I would find in Saudi Arabia. My thinking was that there would be entirely unfamiliar materials or techniques which I would learn about and use. This was not the case. Even the most basic art supplies were difficult to find in Riyadh. Except for a few items, my supplies came by mail from the United States.

I was unable to do any etching or lithography because there was no press in Riyadh. I had intended to take my silkscreen equipment, but when the packers saw the "flammable" warning on the ink cans, they refused to pack them. I "smuggled" my oil paints in an air-tight, metal case. I did not have an air compressor for my air brush. Therefore, my supplies were very limited by the environment and the situation.

While in Riyadh I did use more oil paint than I had previously because it dried quickly in the desert environment. I found that acrylic paint dried too fast. I had not used tube oil paint in my pre-Riyadh drawings; they were made with commercial spray paint, china marker, and 6B graphite

pencil (slides 1 and 2), or with air-brush and acrylic paint (slide 10).

In the "Wahab Al ع Taaya" drawings, I used oil paint washes poured on the paper and rubbed in with a rag. In some of these drawings my intention was to obtain the effect of parchment. Particularly in "Kufic is Beautiful" (slide 20). On top of this tone I applied Arabic writing either by dabbing paint through a stencil or by tracing and painting.

Initially, I began making stencils in order to transfer the image to paper. In many works, I repeated the image using stencils (scissors, shadows, Islamic patterns, Arabic writing) then followed with drawing. Eventually the stencil became a drawing technique. The penetrated paper surface technique I used only when I felt the subtle, shadowed effect was needed in the drawing. It created a quality of shape and line with unique characteristics.

CHAPTER VIII

EASTERN ELEMENTS

The fourth question which I investigated was: Have I acquired any elements in my drawings which could be considered Eastern? My concerns were not those of an Islamic (Eastern) artist. In Islam, the forms used were intended to decorate a functional object (manuscript, pottery, mihrab, mosque, minarette) and they often had a religious meaning. My use of the Islamic forms gave them a foreign meaning in which they were interpreted as visual symbols of concepts I have about the Saudi Arabian environment without relation to function or religious significance. In Islamic art the Arabic writing often flows into the other forms of a design but in my drawings this was rarely the case. I superimposed the Arabic over the patterns or I kept the two separate. My use of the Arab language was not religious or knowledgeable. It was first an interest in the calligraphic, linear qualities of the written language with only the barest understanding of the meaning.

In Islamic art the artists often filled an entire surface without giving any part more importance. In my drawings I have emphasized areas of the patterns giving prominence to sections and directions through the use of value or color.

This delineation has sometimes been based upon rectangular divisions which included a separation between the outer periphery and the middle. This was a conscious exploration of a compositional device--experimenting with the effects achieved by emphasizing the outer areas through borders or value emphasis.

While living in Riyadh some of my physical and environmental comforts, privileges, and freedoms were taken from me, but none of my ideologies were affected. The significant difference lies in my desire to gain knowledge of the Middle East, Islamic art, and the Arab language.

CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSION

This investigation involved the determination of changes in my art caused by living in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. I have been able to identify several obvious influences but the strands of remembered Saudi Arabia are still too fresh in my mind for me to objectively identify all the subtle influences. It will be years before I fully realize the myriad of unconscious influences which that environment has had on me. The Saudi Arabian environment limited and confined me, but living there was also an enlightening experience. I have realized that the physical and psychological aspects of that environment provided both stimulation and restrictions. Westerners seem unable to understand the East, and for this reason many chastise the Saudis. From the West's viewpoint it is difficult to find the good in that unfamiliar mid-eastern society. I have chosen to find and emphasize some positive and unique aspects of that culture and environment by adopting two historically significant artistic images--that of Arabic calligraphy and intricate geometric patterns found in Islamic art. These two images are positive symbols indigenous to the East and have allowed me to express positive concepts of Saudi Arabia.

My drawings served as a means to symbolize my experience with and understanding of the people, their country and history. I took the historic Islamic images and interpreted them in a personal manner which described for me some qualities of the Arabian desert and the Bedouin women--two aspects of the country which impressed me. This translation of forms echoes the manner in which the early Islamic artists took already existent forms and reinterpreted them.

The continuous patterns symbolize the expansiveness of the desert. Here variations are caused by the endless succession of ever changing patterns in the shifting sand and the nearly imperceptible seasonal changes. These are often too subtle to notice from afar. In my drawings many of the subtleties of value and line are not noticeable from a distance either. It requires time to view all the subtle variations in them. The patterns are capable of continuing endlessly in every direction as is the desert.

Color has become another symbol in my recent drawings. The desert and manuscript drawings contain colors which, because of their lack of intensity, serve respectively as symbols of these themes. On the other hand, the bright colors in the drawings of the Bedouin women convey what I feel is an essential element in their character. Black symbolizes the veils covering their brightly colored dresses and human form. In these works the brightly colored patterns and calligraphy represent not only the physical color

but also the intricacies of their human souls as well as the repetitiousness of their lifestyle. I have symbolized these aspects by making the colored patterns caught up in and sometimes inexorably obliterated by the blackness of the veils.

Compositionally my drawings have consistently reflected my interest in manuscript pages. The combination of fields of continuous pattern with patterned or plain borders are similar to the pages of a book. I consciously dealt with the edge first, making patterned borders because such borders were used in historical Islamic manuscripts and later representing the Arab mind's concept of surrounding space. I adopted this concept and developed it in a personal manner in my drawings emphasizing borders and edges.

I have often used the method of cutting stencils to transfer the initial image to the drawing or to create images in a drawing. This method has allowed me to repeat forms thus conveying the endlessness and intricacies of the desert and also the repetitious lifestyle of the Bedouin on the desert. The penetrated surface also symbolizes my search for the concealed aspects of the Arab society.

An investigation of the effect of the environment on my art is an ongoing concern. I will soon return to Saudi Arabia but I will not live in Riyadh. This time I will be living in the desert region near Hafar al Batin. The environment will be quite different. I intend to continue using Islamic sources which I hope will increase my sense of

"poetic consciousness" towards the possibilities of the images. Reaching deeper into my imagination and awareness, I hope to gain a more complete understanding of Islamic art, the Arab people, and to achieve a more personal approach to them in my art.

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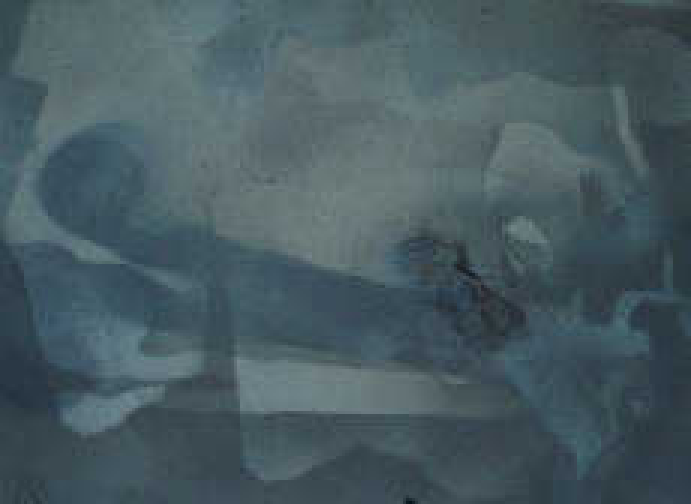

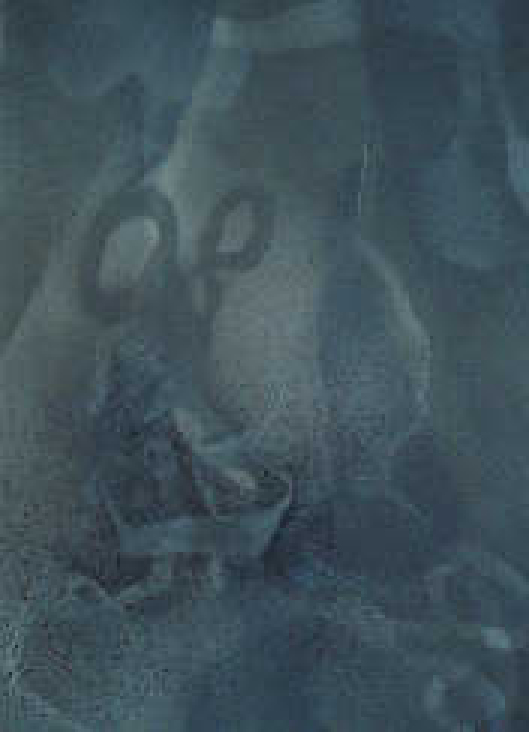

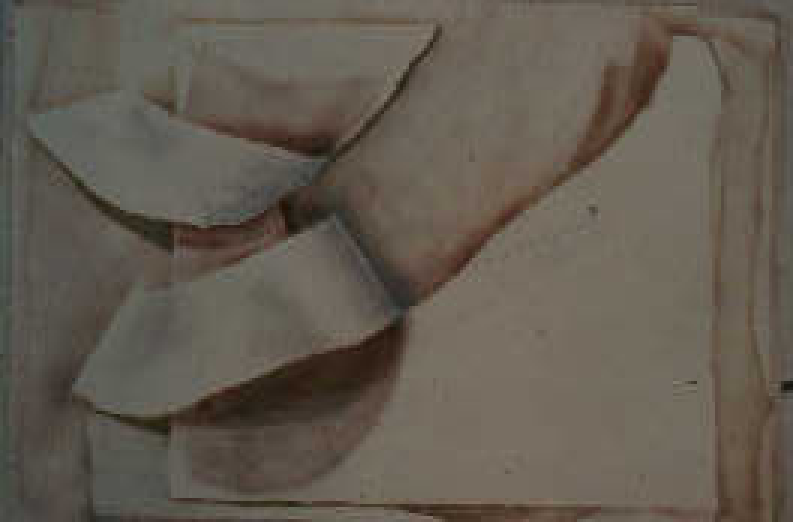

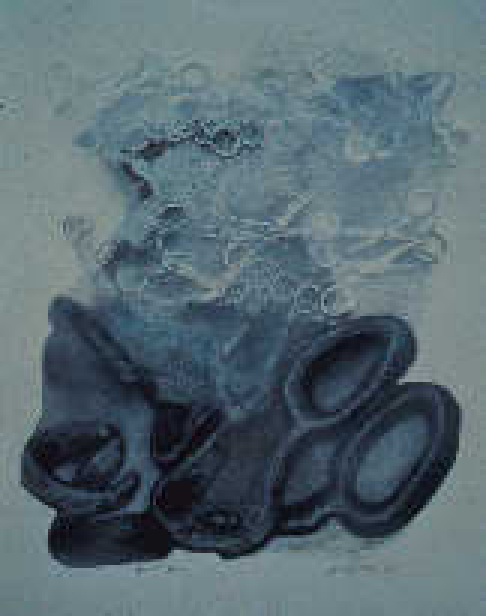

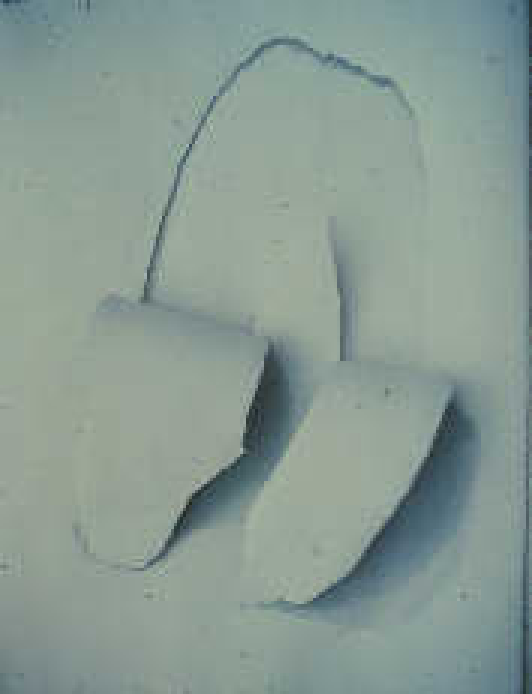

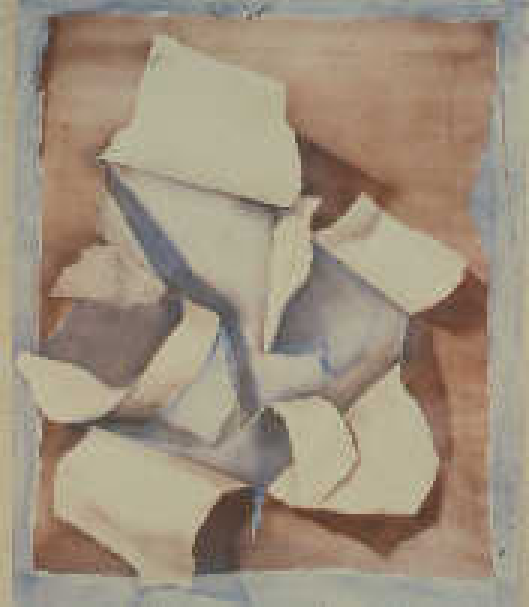

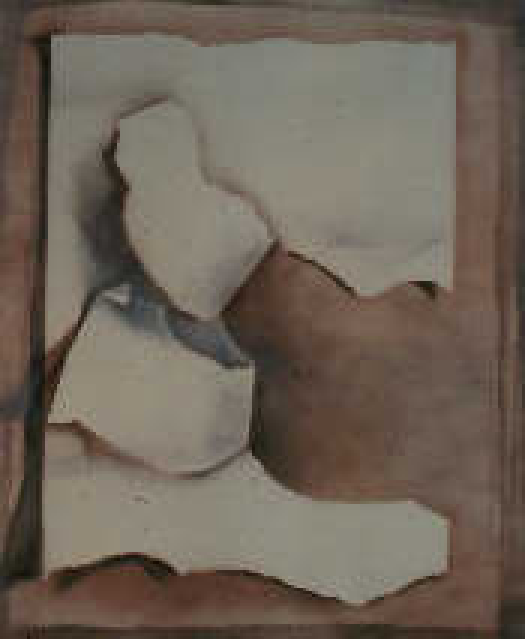

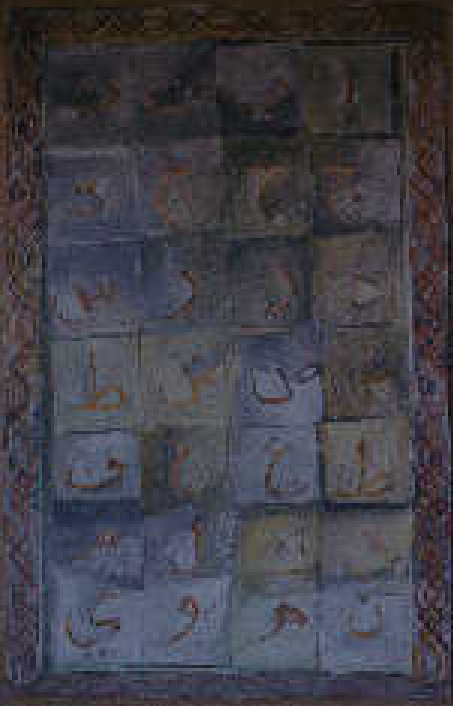

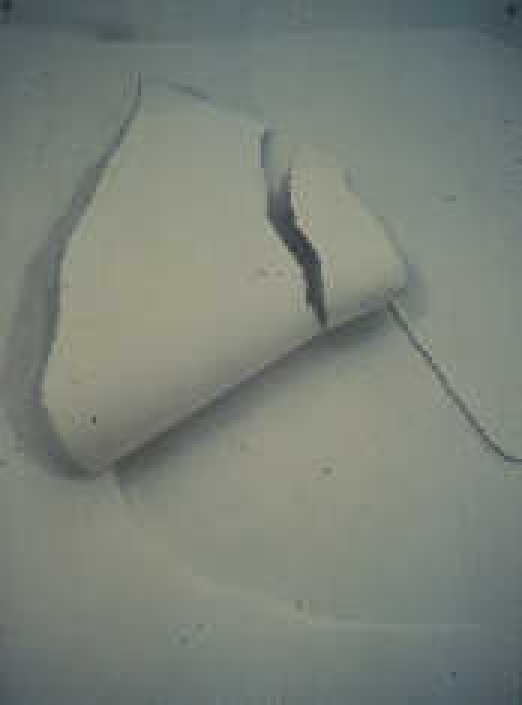

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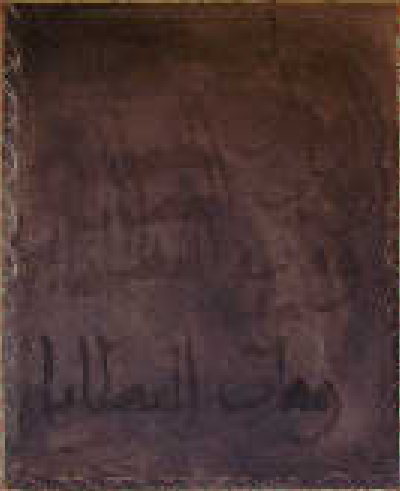

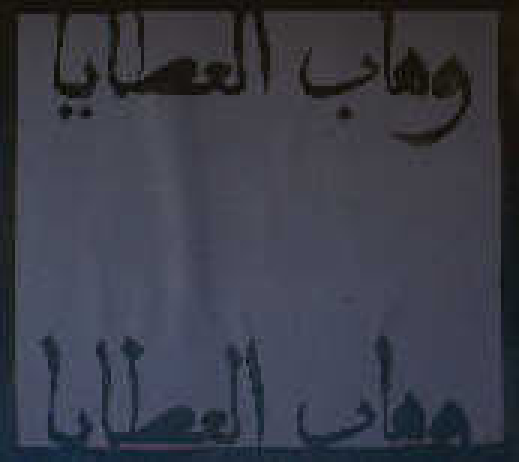
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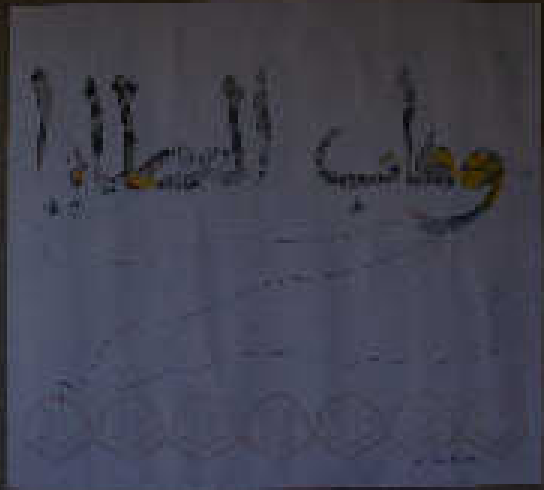

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